

GEORGE WILMOTH

How would I describe George Wilmoth? This is an easy question to answer. I would use only one word to describe him. That word would be "Genius". As long as I have known George, he has always had the ability to look at his immediate environment and identify factors that could best benefit him. He would then incorporate them into his life's matrix and use them to great advantage. Yes, "Genius" is the word I would use to describe George Wilmoth.

My first recollection of George is when we attended Durbin Graded School in the same grade. We didn't begin school together but sometime later he moved "off the mountain," and came to DGS. I don't even know how our friendship began only that it did. One of the things we did was to exchange nights. He would sleep at my house and I would sleep at his. I loved this experience. George lived in a magical place. One had to walk about a mile on a road that lead up the side of a mountain to get to his home. Walking the road was an adventure. Grape and bittersweet vines hung from large trees. Red squirrels were plentiful and time and time again George would let me shoot at them with a 22. To my knowledge I never hit one and I don't know why as I was a pretty good shot. At the end of the road, one would break into the open and there was his house. It was a big old Victorian home that was full of wonderment. We used to sit on a sill in front of a bay window and play canasta. We would do this by the hour. I remember how comfortable it was to sit there in the sunlight and to be warmed by its rays. The house had no electricity and in the evenings kerosene lamps gave off a golden glow. George's bed was a marvel. I don't recall it having box springs, but it had a firm mattress that tilted in all directions. Sleep came really easy after a day of adventuring.

The house contained no refrigerator. However, near the house was a well house. It sat over a spring in which his Mother placed rocks strategically in the water. She placed crocks filled with different foods in them. This was his Mother's method of refrigeration. Milk was there and his Mother would skim off the cream leaving what was called "blue john" that was fed to the hogs. Today we call it skim milk.

George always had some amazing thing to show me. Once he built a box trap and caught a chipmunk. He had worked with it and got it to the point where it would take food from his hand. It was a beautiful thing. I had never seen one so close. To show me, George opened the box where he kept it and out it ran. George was telling me how tame it was and how it would run to him. Well it did. It ran to him, past him and to my knowledge is still running. Try as we could we never did catch that squirrel. So much for taming chipmunks, but it was a great experience for me.

Once, I arrived but he wasn't there. But in a short time he came running up to me with the biggest gray squirrel I had ever seen. One shot had brought it down. I have never seen one that large since. His Dad loved to hunt squirrels with an old Kentucky Rifle. I wonder where that old rifle is now. It was a beautiful thing and hard used. I really liked George's Father. He always seemed glad to see me and this was not a universal response from adults in those days. His Mother was the gentlest of women who treated me so good.

The first game I ever shot was with George. I had a 22 rifle and we walked along a road/path along the mountain. A ruffed grouse flushed and I shot. By some miracle I hit it. I have never felt so elated. George ran over the hill and fetched it for me. I remember I had a moment of regret for having killed such a beautiful creature. However this feeling was short lived and I couldn't wait to show my Grandfather what I had done. I had arrived as a hunter and provider for my family. I was supposed to stay the night with George but couldn't. I had to get home and show off my prize. My first stop was at Barber McNeil's who by his own admission was a great hunter. He paid just respect to my prowess as a hunter and to my prize. Unfortunately my Grandfather was not at home so I had a missed opportunity for further praise. I helped my Mother remove the breast from the bird. She told me that this was what one cooked, as there was little to eat on the remainder of the carcass. She cut the breast into strips and pounded each with a tenderizing tool. She then fried it in butter until a golden brown. I remember that even with all of the pounding, it was still tough and had an unusual taste. She explained to me that it was a game taste that one found in wild animals. I kept the tail feathers for years. I don't know what happened to them. I never killed another grouse.

When we hunted, we did a lot of walking and talking. I think we would shape the world. We voted Bunny Turner the prettiest girl in school. Also at school, George's Uncle Kenton became our 8th grade teacher. He was a very handsome man and I loved to see him write on a chalkboard. His penmanship was a thing of beauty. He often would bring in minnie balls that he would pick up after it rained. He lived near the encampment that the Confederates occupied during the Civil War. Some of the balls had screw holes in them. Mr. Wilmoth told us that when it rained the powder in the soldier's rifles would get wet and they had to reload. The soldiers would remove the minnie balls by using a screw on the end of their ramrods and pull the ball from the barrel. He carried a leather strap in his back pocket and wore tennis shoes. He could sneak up on you without anyone hearing and crack you across the behind with that strap. Being wide, it didn't hurt but did make a loud crack so as to get attention. I was the recipient of one of these experiences. I was talking out of turn which was fairly common and the next thing I knew--whack! Everyone laughed but I can tell you that from that time on whenever I talked I was very cautious about Mr. Wilmoth's whereabouts.

There were places on George's hill where one could see the road from Durbin to Frank. We could clearly see cars traveling both ways. George scared the bejesus out of me one day announcing that he was going to shoot one of those cars and BAM off he aims and shoots. I said, "George, are you crazy?" The distance was over a mile but a 22 bullet could carry that far, then BAM he shot again and then he did it a third time. I didn't know what to do. I started yelling, cussing, and crying. George started laughing and laughing. When he settled down and got me settled down he showed me what he was doing. He would swing the gun on the car and when a tree came into his sight he would shoot into the tree. A neat trick not the least bit appreciated by me. George chuckled weeks about this.

George could take the simplest things and turn them into the most interesting events. Once he bought a skeleton key from the five and dime in Elkins. It cost him ten cents. He carried that key to schools for days showing it to me a few glimpses at a time. When I finally got to his home I couldn't wait to see how it worked. He took the key and opened any door that came across his path. That key was a wonder and George sure was a master at using it. I couldn't wait to get my skeleton key. I even dreamed about it and what fun I would have with it. The next time I went to Elkins I ran to the five and dime and bought one. I couldn't wait to get home to use it. Well, I got home and the key wouldn't open anything that I tried. There was no magic in my key. It was just a hunk of metal and I threw it away. I just didn't have the imagination.

George taught me to smoke. I don't mean to smoke tobacco. Considering what we did, smoking tobacco would have been healthier. George knew the Indian way of doing things. We smoked corn silk, bittersweet, and coffee. We would buy a corn cob pipe for a dime and fill it with corn silk. The silk had to be dark brown or else it wouldn't smoke properly. Besides, Gene Autry had a song about smoking corn silk so it had to be o.k. Smoking bittersweet was something else. George, knowing the ways of the woods and of Indians, would find a bittersweet vine, cut it into about six inch lengths split it, and dry it in his mother's oven telling her it was a school project. Then he would sneak it into scout meetings and give us some. Why he didn't sell it I don't know because he could have made a tidy profit. The bittersweet was porous and when one would light the end, one could puff on it like a cigarette. My Mother, wise woman that she was, said that if we were going to smoke we had to do it on our front porch. As I recall, we began with about eight or ten guys puffing on dried bittersweet. Over the days of smoking, one by one the fellows stopped coming to the communal smoke. Bittersweet is a nightshade and nightshades are poisonous, some more so than others. Our tongues and throats ulcified and no matter how manly we looked puffing away, the pain was just too much to take. No one ever complained about this to an adult as no one ever wanted to admit to a parent that they were smoking regardless of what it was. Smoking coffee was the ultimate in sophistication. Coffee was readily available in our kitchens. What took skill was the rolling of the cigarette paper. We could get papers easy enough. We'd give George money and he had the courage to buy them. No one ever asked him what he was going to do with the papers. Had they done so, I suppose he would have said that he was buying them for his Father. One took the cigarette paper and wrapped it around a pencil licking the side where the ends met to keep it from coming apart. Then at the tapered end of the pencil, one would crimp the paper so the coffee wouldn't spill out. This cylinder was then very carefully removed from the pencil by sliding it off. Then one, with great stealth, would secret coffee from their kitchen and carefully fill the cylinder. We would then light it and smoke it like a rolled cigarette. You could always tell if one was smoking coffee, as they had to tilt their head forward while smoking so the coffee wouldn't fall back into their mouth. We tried smoking cigarettes and cigars. I could steal cigarettes from my Dad and cigars from my Granddad but they made us sick. Plus the chance of getting caught was too much as there was no tolerance for smoking cigars and cigarettes.

George always had some enterprise going. He was the best salesman of Cloverene Salve in Durbin and surrounding environs. A can of Cloverene Salve sold for, I think, twenty-five cents. When you bought a can you would also get an 8 x 10-inch religious picture. The salve cured about anything and the pictures were of such quality that many people would put them on the walls of their homes. George also sold a weekly paper called the Pennsylvania Grit. The Pennsylvania Grit was the tabloid of the day. It had great fiction that it passed off as truth earning it the name Pennsylvania Liar. It was great fun to read. Not only was the news interesting but it had the added attraction of an ongoing serial. Usually these were about some stalwart lad rescuing some beautiful maiden from rascally bullies with much daring do. I sold seeds. I was not the best seed salesman and learned early in life that I would never survive as a salesman of anything. I did sell my seeds though, as I only had to make two stops. One was to my Mother who carefully selected several packs to plant in our garden, and the other to my Grandfather who bought the rest. If one sold enough seeds, one could get wonderful prizes. A boy in town sold enough to get a 22 rifle. However, I couldn't wait for my prize and never sold more one consignment at a time. I opted for a Boy Scout hatchet. After the longest time, it came and I split wood for a fair-thee-well. After a time, I noticed that the sharp end of the hatchet had about the same shape as the flat end. Noting that wood split easier if the sharp end was sharp, I took the hatchet to Mr. Eades to sharpen for me. I paid him a quarter and went back to splitting wood. Soon the same condition as before manifested itself so I took it back to Mr. Eades with the complaint that the hatchet was dull. He told me that the hatchet was no good as it had no temper and would never hold an edge. I went home sadden and terminated my career as a seed salesman and wood splitter.

George and I were in the Boy Scouts together. Preacher Carlson was our Scoutmaster. During one experience, we worked together on our Boy Scout Second Class rank. One requirement was that you had to hike a certain distance, build a fire using no more than two matches, and cook a meal for yourself and others. George's brother Paul and Bill Townsend were our evaluators being senior to us in the Troop. We hiked the road to George's home and came out into an open field. We carried tender dry kindling in our packs, as there was no rule against it. I remember the day was cold but clear with a deep blue sky. There was about a foot of snow on the ground. We cleared a place to build our fires. Taking out our kindling and using Scout knives, we shaved a huge pile of shavings. We used farmer matches start our fires. It took both matches for me but George lit his using only one. Soon we had a good blaze going having gathered larger sticks from the woods. We then cut and sharpened sticks on which we skewered bacon strips and cooked them over the fire. We ate the bacon on homemade bread. Nothing ever tasted so good. We passed in grand style.

We moved on to Greenbank High School. We didn't have many classes together as George took vocational courses and I stuck with the regular program. We did have our adventures though. One of the first socials was a dance. My Dad let me drive our car and George went with me. At the dance, Sadie Lambert and a friend asked me to drive them

to her home. Her friend was going to spend the night. I immediately said yes and it was o.k. with George. Sadie lived in Wesley Chapel and it was way back in the country even for our area. On the road to Sadie's I pulled the car over to the side of the road and announced that we were out of gas. George quickly said, "What do you mean out of gas, we almost have a full tank." So much for my first devious attempt at opportunistic romance. I grumped all the way home.

George took a wood shop class and being quick to finish his projects was always on the lookout for new ones. He asked me if I needed anything and I said I would like a gun rack if it weren't too much trouble. He said, "No trouble." and made me a beautiful one. It sure did look great on the wall of my home where it held my lone gun and fishing pole. I placed it next to the mounted deer head that my Granddad gave me. It was a deer that he and I killed, he shot it. One of George's assignments was to design and build something different. We collaborated on this. I drew a sketch of the "George and Ben Pants Hanger". It was constructed so that it hung on any door. It had two dowels close enough together that one could slide a pair of pants between them. The pants hung by their cuffs. It was a great success. George got a good grade and I got the apparatus. I used it for years. I don't know why we didn't have it patented. If we had done so, we could have lived in grand style off the profits.

We continued to hunt together. George knew of a hound dog that was a hunter. He lived with a family who's home was at the intersection of Route 250 and John's Run. The dog's name was Rennie and was owned by two sons who grew up and moved away. Rennie was old but loved to hunt. When we came to get him he flew to the car. We hunted rabbits with him, and he was amazing to watch. He wasn't as fast as he used to be, but he ran the rabbits just right. There was a fairly wide gap between him and the rabbit allowing us to shoot with out fear of hitting him. He would run those rabbits right by us. We kept Ramps Young supplied with rabbits over some period of time. At one hunt, George brought a young dog that he wanted to train by having him hunt with Rennie. According to George, this was some dog. It had a little bit of every hunting breed that lived. However, as we hunted, the dog continued to be a disappointment to George showing no aptitude what so ever in hunting rabbits. At one juncture of the hunt, Rennie ran a rabbit into a rail pile. George told me to hold Rennie as he was going to remove the rails and give his dog a chance at the rabbit. He said that this would be a great lesson. He removed the rails and exposed the rabbit that had its head hidden and did not move. I suppose in rabbit psychology that if your head is hidden then you're hidden. The rabbit was frozen. George did all kinds of coaxing to get his dog to go after the rabbit. He yelled, cussed, and cajoled. Finally, he grabbed the dog's collar and drug it over to the rabbit. When he let go, the dog ran off. In exasperation, George finally grabbed his dog and threw it at the rabbit. As fate would have it, the dog's trajectory was perfect and it hit right on top of the rabbit. The rabbit jumped up and started running and the dog jumped up and started running. But somehow the dog was ahead of the rabbit and it look like the rabbit was chasing it. George was so angry and frustrated that it was all I could

do to keep him from shooting the dog. From that time on Rennie's, George's, and my hunting was not interrupted with frivolous tasks.

One day we attended a lecture by a trapper. He was an expert at trapping fox and regaled us with tales of his experiences and how he made lots of money selling their pelts. As part of his program, he gave instructions on how to treat our traps so they would have no human odor, which is very big when one is trying to fool the wily fox. What one was supposed to do was to get all kinds of plants that gave off an odor such as Sassafras and Black Cherry. These were cut into small pieces, added to a pot, and cooked into a plant stew in which one would place their traps. This process would remove human smell. The weekend after the lecture, I visited George and he was really down. He had bought himself some leg-hold traps and was curing them in the same pot in which his Mother made her lye soap. It was a beautiful plan but when the curing was finished, the traps couldn't be set. It seemed that George missed one important piece of information during the lecture that of adding water to the pot. Thus he baked his traps and in the process they lost their temper. George was so discouraged that the plan of making money by trapping foxes was never again mentioned.

However, George wasn't down for long. He turned to another enterprise to earn money and with this one he was superb. It was butchering. George was a butcher of hogs and was so successful at this that it cut into our hunting time. In fact, the only way we could go is if I would help him and he could finish early. I had absolutely no skill at this. However I was strong and could do bull work like helping to position the hog for various processes. One of these was to lower the hog into a tub of boiling water to scald it. We would then pull the hog out. The scalding enabled us to remove the hair from its skin. This was probably one of the worse jobs anyone ever got into, however I was desperate. It was accomplished by grabbing the hair with both hands and giving a pull. George being the head and only butcher would sharpen his knives during this process. He did offer curt and critical comments from time to time. He probably thought we appreciated his insight about our endeavor. When the hog was hairless, George would complete the process by passing one of his very sharp knives over the skin in some way that would polish it and make it shine. I had to admit that he had the touch and watching him work one could understand why he was in such great demand. I tell you that over the years I pulled a lot of hog hair.

The last time I remember hunting with George was when I just got my new shotgun. I saved and bought a Sear's bolt action sixteen gage shot gun. I think it cost me the grand sum of twenty-five dollars. I couldn't wait to give it a try. I called up George and we went squirrel hunting. The way to hunt squirrel is to walk into a woods in which you saw squirrel "sign". Sign is a lot of chewed nuts. One would then sit quietly and wait out the squirrels. If patient enough, squirrels would move and this would be their undoing. We were sitting under a large tree when I sighted a squirrel stretched quietly along a limb. I raised my gun and shot. The squirrel jumped and started running and I

shot again and again and again and then again. It took five shots for me to get that squirrel. I thought I did pretty well but George was really disgusted with me at wasting all those shells to get one squirrel. At thirty-five cents a shell, he didn't think the economics were worth it. George was a one shot one squirrel man. We never hunted together again.

George and I not only hunted but fished together as well. Once when staying with him, he took me to the Greenbrier River below his home. He told me to help him build a dam like obstruction in the river Indian style. We built an obstacle across the river with rocks but left a small opening in the center. George would position himself at the opening with a net and I would tromp through the pool. I would scare the fish down stream and into his waiting net. These fish were suckers and in the early spring, their flesh was firm. George said that they were very tasty but I wouldn't eat one of those ugly things. In fact, at that time I wouldn't eat any fish. What George liked best was to remove the roe from the fish and have his Mother scramble them with eggs. He really smacked his lips as he ate this delicacy. Ugh!

One day George came and got me and said he was going to show me where to catch a trout. Trout were the top of our wish list for fishing. We were chub fishermen supreme but trout was king. He took me to a small stream near the West End Bridge in Durbin. It cascaded down the mountain and into the Greenbrier River. I had walked by it hundreds of times and never thought anything about it especially as a potential trout stream. He said that this is where he caught a trout and wanted me to try. He had some worms and threw one into a pool at the base of a small, beautiful falls. Immediately he had a strike and hauled out a female brook trout. He handed me the fishing pole and thus encouraged I cast into the pool and BAM, I had a hit. I hauled out a beautiful male brook trout. We placed those fish side by side along side that stream and that sight stays with me to this day.

We had other fishing adventures but one that vividly comes to mind was the time we fished Laurel Fork. We had to drive some distance to near the Pendleton County Line where we got onto a dirt road and drove to its end. George's brother Paul drove the car. We then had to walk about a mile along a small stream to the larger Laurel Fork where we fished. This place was supposed to be a haven for rattlesnakes so we were very cautious where we walked and placed our hands. A beautiful pool was formed where the small stream emptied into Laurel Fork. It was like something one might see in a fishing magazine. I liked to fish with dry flies and had spent my last bit of money, as usual, on some flies from L. L. Bean. I did this every spring. They were perfectly tied. I attached a Royal Coachman to my leader and cast it into the pool. Without hesitation, a giant brook trout took my fly. Around and around we went. George yelling instructions at me and me trying to stay even with the fish. We had no net never dreaming that we would catch a fish of a size that we couldn't yank out onto the bank as was out usual style. This was one big fish and I didn't think that the strategy of yanking would work but I had no choice. So I gave a mighty heave, out came the trout, and out came the fly. The fish was off. I

thought I had lost it. It was trying its best to flop back into the pool. About that time George let out a mighty whoop and launched himself into the air diving right on the trout. It never had a chance. George sacrificed his body on my behalf and his action saved the day. He gave me the best memory of any trout I have ever caught.

We graduated from high school and George entered the Navy. I would see him on occasion when he was home on leave and I was home from school. He continued his interest in hunting but it is difficult to hunt on a Navy ship so he took up shooting skeet. He told me that they would shoot off the fantail of the ship. The Navy furnished the shotgun and ammunition that was plentiful and free. Not only was he the best shot on the ship but was champion of the Navy fleet to which his ship belonged. Not surprising, he was the best field shot I have ever seen.

Upon getting his discharge from the Navy, he trained and became an Air Traffic Controller. I wondered if this was an extension of some training that he had in the Navy. Once I asked him this and he said, "no". To me, it seemed an odd occupation to come to without some guidance. Growing up, the only time we were around any aircraft was when one flew over Durbin, then we would all run out of our houses to look at it. However, George had a cousin, John Townsend, who served as an Air Traffic Controller with the Army Air Corp in India and was a great storyteller. He may have provided some motivation. John had one of the most beautiful singing and speaking voices I have ever heard. George's speaking voice is similar to his. I don't know about his singing voice as I don't recall ever hearing George sing.

George retired from being an Air Traffic Controller and returned home full time. He reached into his old high school training and became a professional welder. His specialty was heavy equipment. This was a second career for him. He continued with it until an old injury prevented him from wrestling around the heavy equipment on which he worked. What did he do next? He became a repairer and maker of jewelry. Still using this same skill but in a different way. I suppose he still does this.

We didn't see each other for some time. Then one day a letter came announcing that our high school class was having a reunion. It was to be held at the Durbin Methodist Church. The event was one of the greatest experiences in my life. I again saw people with whom I was so close in high school, people that I thought I would never see again. To say we had changed a bit might be an understatement. The only person who still looked like her high school picture was Nancy Harris. I didn't even recognize an old fantasy of mine. Who welcomed us at the beginning of the meal and served as Master-of-Ceremonies, no one other than George. He had organized the affair, got a committee together, contacted us all, designed the program, and with his Mother's help set up the place and the meal. In all aspects, he was terrific. He has served in this same capacity over the years. The last time was this summer when we held our 50th high school reunion. It was a very special time for all of us and George was at his best.

He lives in Leesburg, Virginia with his wife Colleen. His children and grandchildren also live in the area. His sons have their own businesses and George helps

out from time to time. In addition, he harvests deer helping farmers to rid their farms of nuisance deer. He then gives the venison to people who need low cholesterol foods. He also fishes for smallmouth bass catching forty to fifty at an outing. When things get slow, he tools around in his airplane instructing novices how to fly and carrying out CAP and Angel missions. It seems to me that he has created a paradise for himself, and who is more deserving.

I have great affection for George. He has been a major factor in my life. I still remember that we are blood brothers. Early on in our relationship, we stuck our thumbs with our Boy Scout knives and mixed our blood Indian style. I am always glad to see him and to be in his company. I like nothing better than listening to his vision of the world and talking over old times.

If someone would ask me, "What about George Wilmoth?", I would respond without hesitation, "Thank God for George Wilmoth!"

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